

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **CONCLUSION**

The study has been aimed at examining the extent and nature of participation of women panchayats in the panchayat process in the district of Cooch Behar after statutory reservation of PR post for women. We have reviewed the shifting facets of PR and social and legal status of women ( in Chapter 1). Then we have analysed socio economic and political background of women respondents ( Chapter 5), how and why women have joined PR, the extent of their participation in terms of familial obligations ( Chapter 6) and their overall participation in PR decision making process ( Chapter 7). We have also noted the views and assessment of our male respondents about women's social position and PR role performance ( Chapter 8 ). Brief summary of the findings has been furnished at the end of the Chapters 5 - 8.

In this last Chapter, Section 1 summarises the major findings and determines how far our working hypotheses are really tenable with them all. As borne out from the study, certain pertinent points seem significant and expedient for proper understanding and evaluation of rural and gender developmental role of women which are discussed in Section 2. A few suggestions both desirable and necessary for fructifying and improving women's participation in PR process are listed in Section 3. Certain directions of future research have also been submitted at the end.

#### **1.SALIENT FINDINGS**

Majority of our respondents are from SC community, they are relatively younger in age. They are married women mostly. Majority of them have educational attainment of School Final and above.

As to the background of women respondent's families some sort of educational attainment is evident. From occupational standpoint predominance of non agricultural families is clearly visible in the sample (61%). It may be emphasised that in several other similar studies same trend is also observed - for example salaried class in Haryana (ISST : 1995) and only 12% agriculturists in Kerela. Our findings more or less tally with others.

Over all educational background both of women and their families is not definitely tending to be low, if not high. In all statistical tests efforts to guess the impact of education both of women and their families on women's participation decipher no concrete corelation at all. All these indicate that education alone does not play significant role or it has no unilateral bearing on women's role performance.

Significantly 25% women have more matured political background in the sense that they have been primary members of parties long before their PR induction. One hypothesis

was that matured members are to be more convincing in PR participation because of political exposuer and association with political process at least compared to new members. But it is unfolded in statistical test of corelations that they are not as vocal, assertive or forthwith as they were expected to be. They seem to be conservative and not so much upright in performance. New party members are rather more determined and comparatively dominating in performance. Perhaps it suggests that senior party women members may have taken membership for any reason of their own but they have not had that training, experience or determination to equip themselves to be assertive.

Sampled GPs may be categorised as backward and forwards ( See Chapter 4 ) that is some GPs are contagious to urban centers and some are in remote areas. Segregation of data of two types of GP separately (though not furnished separately in chi square test Table) dose not provide statistical relations with any sort of women's participation. Thus it is quite possible to emphasise that respondents of comparatively remote area are not lagging behind than their forward looking counterpart.

From the study it is found that in terms of Tiers and parties women have contrasting socio.economic and political background.

In GP Tier more younger, lowly educated women with low land holding sized families, lower party membership grade are found. Reversly in CP group more older aged, higher educated, service families, higher party membership grade and more women with public addressing ability are evident. PS caters more of middle aged women, medium education and medium to high land holding families. In definite contrast to CP, GP and PS have greater number of new recruits from families which did not have members in earlier PR bodies.

Compared to other parties, CPM has more higher aged, lowly educated women though not far away from Congress as to higher education profile. More families of CPM respondents have middle holding size. CPM women have higher party membership grade, more public addressing ability. But the party also accounts for most of the non party member women.

Majority of younger, middle aged and medium educated women hail from Congress and other parties. Congress party has recruited women more from agriculturists families. and landless families. This party has lion's share in recruiting women in PR for the first time from respective families. Thus CPM women have more matured political background and in economic terms Congress party women tend to have comparatively lower profile, if not clear pro poor orientation.

Right from the writings of Machiaveli or Hegel to the period of Consent Theory when individual was the primordial unit of social reality, the interest of women was identified with

the interest of the families. With some minor exceptions throughout the world public policies assume and reinforce women's primary responsibility for the care of children and the home<sup>1</sup>. The women are "domestic slaves, cramped into the job of wife and mother<sup>2</sup>. Invoking private and public divide 'ideologically' women's seclusion from public life is justified and strengthened which in turn debars them from meaningful participation in public affairs. In effect all discussion of women's outside participation revolves around how and to what extent they are adjusting public roles with their foremost obligation to family. In view of absence of requisite legislation for conducive context, proper awareness, family support and also strong cultural stigma women are likely to be entrapped in a quandary.

However, neither family obligations nor family disturbances are found deterrents for women's participation. The findings of the study indicate the force of induced change. Because of reservation and political compulsion women get political opening through the initiative of parties and with the consent of families. As such families can not withhold women's right of participation in panchayats. For this reason women are less troubled by open public private role conflict. Moreover, familial responsibilities are not debarring them from taking up panchayat role. Sometimes performing domestic works (as by rising early in the morning) and sometimes with the cooperation of family members women are able to undertake most of the PR works. But women are still not considerably freed from domestic obligations. Thus adjustment or sacrifice sometimes in either front may not be rare indeed.

Political participation is a complex phenomenon and essentially an outcome of socio-economic, political and psychological preconditions and circumstances. However, despite their numerical strength women have the rudimentary position in political process simply because everything <sup>is</sup> conducive to be so. Mythology, religion, socio cultural taboos, behaviour training, physical mobility restrictions, mode of work, provisions for rewards and punishment all are used to socialise girls to conform to their constricted roles. The ingrained gender discrimination is manifested in personal, political, systematic and structural differentiation between men and women and it is the root cause of invisibility of women in politics.

Penetration right upto decision making process is not only the uphill proposition for general women but also depends on a number of preconditions like understanding of the process, information of the problem, skilful deliberative qualities, dominant position in the party hierarchy in party based process and more commandingly the organisational position or modicum of power a group possesses in a given socio political order. Suffice it to say that women in all these fronts are clearly disadvantaged. Thus women not only should have gestation period but also should require to be emancipated from various structural and situational constraints.

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1. Even in China (Croll : 1985: chapter 11) female foetus is undesirable and killed. Communist rule of 80 years in Russia, as noted in Paristroika, has discovered that role of women in outside world has disturbed family life and prompted problems in social behaviour, morality and culture.

2. Largio (1975 : 286). *In Leavitt* (ed.)

The study however, has indicated that the PR participation of women in the form of attendance, opinion expressed, issue raised in the PR meetings, confidence reposed and satisfaction for effective participation all is noteworthy. They are not merely meek spectator or ornament in decision making, rather a likely force to reckon with. Moreover they maintain contact with villagers, usually take their problems into cognizance and try to deliver whatever possible. But actual reflection of their views in decisional output leaves much to be desired even though their constant demands for inclusion of their points must have bearings in the long run.

For quite long time women's participation was narrowly conceived and their presence in formal political structure was termed as deplorable. But now it is increasingly being realised that private public dividing lines are not so steadfast and political participation needs to be widely conceptualised. For example, opposing destruction of fuel resources in Chipco Movement in India, Green Belt Movement in Kenya, protest against children disappearance in Argentina, demonstration against foreign borrowings in Jamica, overwhelming activism in International Peace, Ecological, Racist movements all indicate that even their concern for families very often spur them to act politically. Thus together with their formal participation, when we encompass their role in informal spheres women participation becomes really 'creditable'<sup>3</sup>

Because of absence of Nyaya Panchayat, as in West Bengal, Panchayat members have intervening roles in adjudicating local level disputes such as land or family cases. To some commentators because of this type of role number of cases coming to legal courts have decreased considerably. Women members are found to be actively involved and quite successful in this sphere ( except land disputes ). Women members have also shown interest in convincing women about family planning and literacy etc.

West Bengal has taken the lead by making Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad the soul of PR<sup>4</sup>. Not only the meetings of these bodies have statutorily been stipulated but also the resolutions of these have to be duly considered by every GP and any omission here will be gross impropriety ( Section 17A, sub Section 2 of WB Panchayat Act 1992). From a meeting of one Gram Sansad of Andaran GP ward we have found that women constituted nearly 32% of total attendance. Some women informed that as males are otherwise preoccupied they had to attend the meeting because some issues were to be raised and also to note down the pro-

3. N.P.P. {National Perspective Plan (1988:160-161). Sec also Reddy & Patnaik. 1993. Omvedt. 1993. Tiger & Sheper (1975: 136). Randall (1982 : 41-44).

4. According to West Bengal Panchayat Act as amended upto 1992 all registered electorate of a constituent ward of the GP will comprise one Gram Sansad. Gram Sansad, meeting twice a year, will decide policy priorities for economic development, principle of beneficiary selection and constitution of Beneficiary Committee and will act as watchdog. Gram Sabha will meet once a year and will take stock of activities and finance of the GP.

ceedings. Some women, mostly widow, openly questioned why they were deprived of house building scheme under Indira Abas Yojana while some others got it. All women panchayat members of the ward were present though they did not actively take part. Truely it was not possible because the meeting was dominated by questions, demands and Chairperson explaining the reasons and elaborating future course of action. Convincingly women were not dumb spectators specially as to reaping economic benefits and in overall sense they are not nonchalant about panchayat activities or village affairs.

Chairpersons have comparatively higher economic and political background, dominated by families in the sense that majority have family members in PR. But as to their performance they have fumbled feebly. Some of them (11%) raise issues in meeting according to wishes of husbands, more of them (16%) hold that they are only partially effective in PR meetings. Even for some (21%) their points are totally ignored in meetings. 32% (6 of 19 ) are to relinquish PR post as well.

Even though Chaipersons have not been as "namesake representatives" as in other studies<sup>5</sup> their performance is comparatively subdued and deserves improvement. The very nature of job requirements and somewhere candidature selection process etc. account for the falling.

To be at the top and manage it successfully are arduous tasks requiring dexterity and experience necessary for deliberative bodies. Failures here become not only substantial but also get wider publicity which may jeopardise women's cause in broader context. It certainly requires accommodating and supportive cooperation and healthy convention of selecting only willing and capable incumbents who would further cause both of PR and women.

Statutory reservation uniformly and comprehensively has provided incarnation of thousands of women in panchayats. In all probability women leadership at least in the sense of "office holder" or "manager"<sup>6</sup> has come to stay. From male respondents particularly it seems imposing that women's entry and leadership have received overall social approval and somewhere acclaim. The cultural ethos restricting women only in domesticity are being reappraised indeed.

But that does not imply that such approval is instant and wholehearted. ' Bias against' women is still to be dispelled as instances in two PSs disclosed. If not for exclusive cultural stigma, frustration, fear of losing positions of power, patronage and profit etc. compel women to be undervalued to some extent at least. It does not of course reflect upon overall social reality. Neither it is found nor it would be pragmatic to be skeptical or critical about women factor in PR from now onwards.

5. Pai Sudha (1998). Pradhanis in new Panchayats. *Economic and Political Weekly* 2 May.

6. Blondel, Jean. ( 1987:20) *Political Leadership*. Sage, London.

Before statutory reservation women had very marginal or token representation in PR throughout India. Legal compulsions now compel to have wider possible representation for women. Women respondents cite non reservation as the cause of their absence in earlier elections. Equally statutory prodding has put forth the political opening for roughly 3/4 of women respondents who are most likely to embrace and pursue the political career. In other words, without reservation they could not endear political career.. Thus statutory reservation has become the gateway for women to political participation.

Another dimension is: women are still to surpass the statutorily provided boundary of panchayats that is they are as yet unable to grab other positions besides PR posts. In rural set up there are other socio political power centers such as Market Committee and School Committee etc. Our efforts in one GP to identify whether women have already gone beyond or are inducted in other Center of power indicate that except in PR posts in no other such Committee or Center women are at all visible. Though it is too much to expect that women will instantly and invariably be visible and successful every where it indicates that women have so far not been able to cross over the statutory limit of PR positions.

As to the moot point of women's overall participation in PR it is estimated that about 25% have no prominent penetration and they are to eschew political career. Some were not interested and really dragged in, for others male blizzards and consequent frustration are the general attributing reasons.

As such the study establishes significant breaks with the results of other similar studies undertaken so far. It provides for the women not so much 'elitist' background, family obligations and domination not much deterring. Education (also age, religion, caste) etc. having no significant bearing on their participation. Right from attendance to participation in PR meetings, from performance in institutional process of panchayats to informal activities their performance seems rejuvenating.

## **2. DEVELOPMENTAL ROLE - THE NATURE AND EXTENT**

The study also raises a spate of questions adequate resolution of which would chart the proper role performance and perspective for women panchayats. The apparent proficient participation of women should not be construed as success story. The triumph is to that extent that they are not docile or dormant. But reckoning of too much tangible achievement is obviously premature as their performance is certainly permeated by factors like functional and political processes.

Women panchayats are in a dilemma. Reservation is for powerlessness but whenever women assume power they are to be as compelling and powerful members and to retrieve gender development in addition. Induction of women in political process is favoured for various reasons such as - with their on the spot understanding of the basic problems women would contribute their mite, influence others to come and work for women specific problems and motivate fellow women to come and work for women. After all by bringing in felt priorities and direction women are to imprint their mark in developmental decisions for consolidating and justifying rationale of reservation policy. Though there is no chart or design as such the general conviction is that women would accentuate and accelerate the pace of decisions bringing important bearing on gender development.

The fundamental contemplation is to what extent women can really direct rural development and drive home gender development in particular. If the functional sphere of panchayat, nature of the panchayat responsibilities, women's group nature and political process are closely looked at one feels convinced that women members have not much scope and opportunity to stand for women development.

**Functional Autonomy:** The 73rd Amendment Act is explicit in conceptualising panchayat as 'institution of self government' and states have now the responsibility for constitutions and making panchayats such an institution. But the perusal of conforming State Acts convinces one that panchayats are still being perceived as only an administrative machinery with increasing peoples' participation and the ideological thrust of the Amendment is clearly missing.

In the State Acts assigned and discretionary powers are much more and a handful of not so cardinal developmental functions fill up the mandatory list. Problems here are from two counts. Delineation of powers/functions of respective PR Tiers are utterly overlapping and whatever seems meaningful has been usurped by bureaucracy. The West Bengal Finance Commission Report 1996 documents that Departmental Plans are much bigger than PRIs and their implementation is exclusively dominated by Officials. In the present departmental structure of bureaucracy down to village level it is not possible to empower PR Tiers comprehensively over any specific subject and the plain fact is that vast bureaucracy would not give in their overarching domination so readily.

Even when some powers are really delegated they are not in toto. At best they are not more than community mobilisation either for awareness (Child Development in Integrated Child Development Services) or convincing people to take advantage of the various opportunities (loan of District Rural Development Agency). For substantiation, GP may have to promote primary education but curricula are the preserve of Board of Education and management the responsibility of Managing Committee of the School. Can any GP or its members really ensure that classes are held regularly when management is not its concern? In this backdrop connotation of self government becomes tightfisted and parochial indeed.

The Programmes available for women in panchayats, though grossly overlapping, are mainly of three types. 1) Anti Poverty Programmes providing wage and employment such as Jowar Rogar Yojana (JRY), Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). 2) Women Welfare Programmes like Vocational Training Programme, Rastriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), Mahila Samridhi Yojan (MSY), Support for Training and Employment Programme (STEP), Hostel for Working Women, Family Counselling Centres, Residential and Non-Residential Training for Poor and Depressed Women. 3) Social Welfare Programmes such as Primary Health Care, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Intensive and Integrated Health Programme, Unified Immunisation Programme (UIP), Universal Primary Education, Child Survival and Safe Maternity, Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP)<sup>7</sup>.

However, regarding implementation of those Programmes following points have to be considered. a) All Programmes evenly and adequately are yet to converge everywhere. For example Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA) Scheme where women panchayats have wider roles has only 28 units against sanctioned strength of 130 at the end of 1996 in this district. b) Awareness about all schemes is in no way encouraging among members<sup>8</sup>. c) While Schemes like MSY are saving Schemes at individual level, some other welfare Schemes like STEP, Hostel for working women, Family Counselling Centers etc. are manned by Non Governmental Organisations under the supervision of Department of Social Welfare, Government of India. d) Some Schemes like ICDS, Primary Health are undertaken by Governmental personnel and panchayat women at best can convince others to take advantage from those. e) Benefits through self employment Schemes like IRDP are largely illusive for women as Banks are reluctant ( despite stipulation ) to sanction loans without securities and women in general are unable to furnish such because of male ownership of property and also because of sheer poverty. f) Significantly most of the Schemes are tied that is ordaining clearly as to who shall receive what share and on what basis. For example 22.5% of total JRY fund is to be reserved for SC and STs and of the remaining 60% for employment generation and 40% for material purchase. Similarly 50% benefits of IRDP and TRYSEM (Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment Programme) are to be earmarked for SC/STs and here women share is 40% of the total. g) Concurrence is that benefits of developmental schemes have been accrued not by the poor section for whom all these are intended<sup>9</sup>.

7. Annual Report 1995 (p.61) lists 27 Programmes for women. Department of Women & Child Development. Government of India.

8. Nandal Roshni ( 1996:125). *Women Development & Panchayati Raj*. Spellbound Pub. Rohtak.

9. Mallick (1993), Gurumurthy (1987), Nath, Prodose (1986). Panchayats and Rural Development. *Society and Change*. Vol 3 (1). And various other findings in *Economic and Political Weekly* such as Shanker (1991). JRY An Assessment. 16 July.

Scrutiny of panchayat process establishes that their own resource, if at all, are extremely meager. One GP Budget for 1995-96 ( Andaran GP) reveals that its own resource was to the extent of 9.3% while its establishment cost amounted to 8% of total budgetary outlay. And PR has clear JRY and other handed down scheme specific fixation. For example JRY alone accounted for 58% of that GP's total expenditure for 1994-95 which was mainly for construction/repair of roads.

Furthermore, members may have played significant role in formulating comprehensive area plan for respective areas taking into consideration peoples needs and area specific problems, but there seems no relationship between District Plan and budgetary allocation etc. GP formulates area plan and all GP Plans are firstly compiled by PS and lastly by ZP and one District Plan ( Municipality Plans also included) is finally prepared which is then integrated into State Plan. One important aspect is that financial devolution both from center and state does not follow yearly plan of GP and District Plan but lumpsum sanctions under schematic heads are the usual financial practice.

Logically therefore the whole gamut of rural development or gender development follows the direction of those schemes<sup>10</sup>. The working of panchayat institutions substantiates the fact that PR members are busy in selecting beneficiaries and construction sites for and according to different devolved schemes available. Even in this respect members have no remarkable freehand because of party control over decision making.

**Political Compulsion :** If PR is thus functionally constrained, panchayats are also indissoluble part of wider political process. And as such party control over 'political panchayat' will be enormous. Even some supporters of West Bengal panchayat experiment like Lieten (1992:1572) admit that " substantial decisions are made at the level of party"<sup>11</sup>. Strong organisational control of State Committees, District Committee, Sub-divisional and Local Committees of political parties seem unequivocal. Such controls deprive individual autonomy of members and compel them to act within the orbit of party preferences. This dimension is particularly important for the Left parties for their absolute sway in PR bodies and rigorous party discipline compared to others. In this context, from women standpoint they are not likely to make meaningful individual impact on policy output or gender development and more frequently they will be " puppets in the hands of their political bosses"<sup>12</sup>.

10. All programme at village level do not allow any flexibility in terms of tuning them to the specific needs of the village as they are governed by center/state guidelines thus leaving no scope for accomodating the priorities of the people. Wrote Thapiyal (1996:76). Decentralised Planning in PR Frame. In *Jain & Hochgesang*.

11. In West Bengal the Study of Child in Need Institute (ISST:1999) has noted that most women members try to implement policy decided by the local parties. See also Webster (1995). Acharyya (1993). Panchayats and Left Politics. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 29 May. Bhattacharyya (1995). New Challange for Bengal Left *Economic & Political Weekly*. 17 July.

12. Uday Basu. Panchayat Women may Succumb to Party Diktat. *Stateman*. 7 Nov. 1993

Though not statutory, still another dimension of party control found particularly in PR bodies controlled by the left parties is the constitution of Booth Committee<sup>13</sup> at GP, Coordination Committees at PS and ZP levels. Even the Chairperson (Pradhan) of GP is dominated by Pradhan Sahayak (helping) Committee.

Each GP has to draw up Comprehensive Area Plan but it has to be accorded by concerned Boot Committees. Of course GP members are included in Booth Committees and legally responsible for and Chairpersons are incorporated in seceding Tier Committees. Still the fundamental contemplation is - if selection of beneficiaries has to conform to prescribed norms of the specific schemes and preference of such 'political' committees is it not persuasive that whoever - men or women - is the panchayat member it would not make serious variance as to the direction of development and outcome of selection list !.

Moreover, for electoral compulsion every aspirant has to secure party sponsorship which in turn compels them to succumb to overriding party policies. Indeed parties have trivial track records about women cause. Also because of requirement of majority support from electorate, who are not genderwise segregated anyway, it is inevitable that only soft or noncommittal candidates have any chance of being elected. So they are not women's representatives but of people's and parties' and as such women are generally averse to being dubbed as only women representatives and show preference to those programmes which are for general interests.

Long before the advent of organised Women Movement, women in Bengal were forerunner in Indigo Revolt 1859, movement against Partition of Bengal 1905 and so on. In Tebhaga, Naxalite and various other stirs they also did not lag behind<sup>14</sup>. They are now mobilised by parties, Women Wings of parties and to some extent by Women Organisations. In every party meeting they have about 30-35% of total attendance. Paradoxically even then women status has not been remarkably elevated here more than elsewhere raising the question why it is so and how it can be improved. Mainly it may be due to the fact that women are mobilised as party members and not as women and no movement has ever been organised or its ideology (even Naxalite) encompassed gender concern at all. If political parties and women participation<sup>15</sup> and women issues are antithetical what will befall to panchayat is not beyond comprehension. Alarmingly if women interests were not reflected even in radical policies particularly of the Left<sup>16</sup>, endorsement of present reformist policies will hardly permit opening to uplift the

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13. Consisting of eminent (mostly political) persons Booth Committees are informally constituted for constituent wards of GP to guide role performance of PR members. They are different from statutory Beneficiary Committee and found mainly in PR bodies controlled by left parties. Similar is the Coordination Committees for PS and ZP.

14. Custer, Peter (1987). *Women in Tebhaga Uprising*. Naya Prakas. Calcutta. See also Singha Roy (1992) and Guha (1996)

15. Custer Peter (1987:133) ibid

16. Singha Roy, DK (1992:128-29). Also (1995). Peasant Movements and Empowerment of Women. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 16 Sep. Moreover, left parties have neglected mobilisation & organisation of women on their special issues and " women in the parties are more vocal against feminist perspective". Wrote Datar, chayya ( 1984:71). The left parties & Invisibility of women. *Teaching Polities*. Vol 10 ( Annual)

normative social relations and consequent marginalisation.

Articulation of any cause essentially entails conviction which is the consequence of mobilisation along such lines. Women Organisations have hardly made impact in sensitizing women everywhere. As is the trend elsewhere, vast majority of women respondents are for the first time in panchayats to fill reserved quota and that too, by their admission, for parties' initiatives. Reservation at a stroke took parties aback and they have a tough time in fielding so large number of women candidates. Somewhere they dragged some of the women respondents - (here 20%) who are not seriously interested at all. Evidently only 25% women were somehow active in party platform before panchayat incarnation. As indoctrination is almost absent, is it tenable to expect gender championing simply because they themselves are women ?

**Gender Development :** In Britain women have increasingly been assertive and successful in parliament and local government in securing measures like nursery facilities, abortion and others ( Barbara: 1983:172-3). In Norway the 'care and care work concern' is the most significant contribution of women ( Lovenduski & Norris: 1993:258). In India women in panchayats, to some extent at least, have worked for improvement in health, family welfare, banning of liquor and video parlour, upgradation of schools, better water management<sup>17</sup> to lessen women's burden of carrying it from distance. But there is also other side where women do not favour or work for exclusively women's concerns.

In the study of seven women national leaders of the present world (Genovese:1993) it is established that they hardly encourage hope for women issues and perspective . Mrs. Gandhi did not appoint any women cabinet minister nor did she encourage specific measure for women politicians. In fact conditions of general women deteriorated during her long tenure. Margaret Thatcher provides the extreme instance of repudiation of women 's interest for long 12 years. Both Mrs. Gandhi and Bhutto harped that they were not women implying that they transcend the gender they belong to. The concept 'gender' marks the conceptual breakthrough in explaining and understanding women's status in relational term. In every variable like psychology, career, context or style gender has its bearing. But in any contrast between genders it is also important that women are in fact in paradoxical no win position. If women are strong ( like Thatcher) they are ridiculed as Iron Lady or more than man, if they are meek ( like Isable Peron of Argentina) they substantiate that they can not govern.

Committee on Status of Women (1974:289) lamented that unlike in earlier times women today do not show concerted articulation in championing women cause. Majority of MP, MLAs ( Mehta & Billimoria:1976:59) do not bother to take interest in women specific problems. Ahmed <sup>18</sup> took cognizance of the similarity in the political behaviour of women and men, In the National workshop (National Commission for Women : 1993:3) the uncomfortable

17. Sharma Kalpana. Women Do Not From a Constituency. *Times of India*. 18 June 1989.

18. Ahmed (1975:311). Women in Politics. In *Jain* (ed.)

impression is that women have not formed lobby to influence public opinion in favour of women. All these pertain to the fact that women elites are apathetic to problems affecting larger sections of women in India. Similarly our findings about women respondents reveal that they do not work for women exclusively. This reverts us to ponder why this is so and to what extent they are capable of justifying the rationale of their induction.

In the literature women's needs are considered both as practical and strategic. Practical needs like child care, fetching water, cooking etc. arise out of gender division of labour and strategic needs pertain to very cause of their 'oppression' like male domination itself. Practical needs do come under panchayat perview and women members may act as harbinger but scheme specific activities clip their wings significantly. Addressing strategic needs not only demands more concerted action but also they are outside of panchayat roles.

Women are new entrants, yet to establish credential and in voting terms outnumbered in decision making of panchayats. As they are likely to face problems like scoffing or seclusion, what will be problematic individually can better be won by collectivity. Unitedly they can overcome outright male antagonism in panchayats, can force women components of any scheme neglected so far, compel cognizance of their views and better execution of all programmes. Expectation of gender perspective will materialise in the face of women's group efforts. Collectivity really has got vast potential.

As and when women in panchayats are able or willing they can utilise their presence for improving own position. According to 'critical mass' theory reservation by ensuring qualitative shift through quantitative strength would become institutional resource<sup>19</sup>.

However, the respondents are found short of collective entity. Though members of the same party could have better prospect, they uniformly inform that generally they come to panchayat Offices, only during meeting and when absolutely necessary. In most cases their primary concern is to take care of specific preoccupations or bargaining for ward problems. Also because of geographical distance - more at ZP and PS - they seldom meet or sit together to plan for a united stand. Even in the face of undervaluation (as found in two PSs) they could not face it unitedly.

For any collectivity group solidarity or class consciousness is exigent. However, use of class stereotype in case of women is not only ambiguous but also conflicting. The dilemma is that in order to realise rights cross class mobilisation is necessary but socio-economic (even domestic) differences impinge adversely on such prospect. Bina Agarwa<sup>20</sup> has observed that it

19. Lele, MK & Singh (1993:37). *Women in Local Government in Maharashtra.....*Paper presented at the fifth International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Costa Rica.

20. Agarwal, Bina (1994:492). *A Field of One's Own. Gender and Land Right in South Asia.* Camoridge University Press. Cambridge.

would be romantic to suggest that socio-economic cleavages will not be barriers for collective action. Nevertheless, to one social perception women are the greatest enemy of women themselves, at the same time infighting only among women in reserved seats will further circumvent any prospect of alliance<sup>21</sup>. In fact the usual argument that women will clinch women development is conceptually fought with inconsistency. Chafe (1972:176) is convincing in arguing that it is a paradox that women have dialectical group identity. They are separate but diffused, distinct but live in greater intimacy with 'their oppressor'. For this group consciousness so pivotal yet problematic.

India's past experience brings out the unpalatable evidence that without taking into account the structural differences of SC/STs with other people has burgeoned anomalies in the results of reservation<sup>22</sup>. Like SC/STs, women are not homogeneous but divided by cleavages like race, culture, economy, education or religion. In the same vein it is also found true that well placed SC/ST rural elites simply capitalise on their superior awareness and accessibility<sup>23</sup> and do very little in hastening the advancement of their less advantaged brethren<sup>24</sup>. Without due regard to such structural and practical divides and problematics it would be imprudent to count upon gender development from women.

Structurally women have meaningful scope to exert collective pressure only in Gram Panchayats where decisions are arrived at in general meetings (held twice a month). In PS and ZP their strength is fragmented because Standing Committees - usually two women in each in this district - are real repository of decision-making. Still more exasperating is the very nature of panchayat responsibilities. Each incumbent has to represent sectional interest of the electorate of the concerned ward. As the interests of each ward is diverse their efforts are to bargain for reaping widest possible developmental gains for their particular wards. Thus, localism in panchayat decision-making is simply inevitable. In case of beneficiary selections question of collectivity does not arise at all as this is worked out on ward basis. In the cases of allocation of resources question of collectivity is beyond contemplation because allocation to one area will be a deprivation to other areas.

This is to grapple with how delicate collectivity really is and not to imply that en block possibility will ensure all round gender development in the present functional context of panchayats. Had it been so, workings of All Women Panchayats (AWP) would have proved otherwise. Though still not well documented, AWP's workings reveal some unsatisfactory causes of their inception and performance - like male migration, reluctance to share power

21. Kishwar, M. Women in Power. *Times of India*. 22 Sep. 1996.

22. Desouza (1986:110). Socio Economic Constraints on Development. In Sharma (ed.) *Development: Socio Economic Dimension* Rawat. Jaipur.

23. Bardhan, Asoke (1990:93). People's Participation in Planning. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*. Vol36(1).

24. Sen Amartya (1985:37). How is India Doing. In Basu & Sission (ed.) *Social and Economic Development in India* Sage. New Delhi.

with women and sometimes subserviency to men ( Mohanty : 1995:3349). ( Another dimension is that almost all 22 AWPs are in backward and tribal areas). Clearly it is not authenticated that women there work only for gender cause even though because of their life experience literacy, water etc. may be their priorities. The study of 12 AWPs in Maharastra<sup>25</sup> concluded that Jawar Rojgar Yojana " has homogenised development endeavours and there is actually little difference in the formal schemes implemented by them and other panchayats". In fact political incumbency and exclusive gender concern seem mutually incompatible<sup>26</sup>. Judged by the panchayat process it may be perhaps be true that complete group solidarity , except on broad policy, is problematic because of the nature of panchayat responsibilities.

All these constraints will have to be taken into account while analysing the role of panchayat women (also men). For women plausibility is that they can implement effectively the women components of available schemes. They have no clear scope to go beyond these. Admittedly women can play meaningful role in mobilising or convincing other women as to family planning or literacy but these are obviously extra panchayat responsibilities,

Thus the performance of women panchayats has to be adjudged in wider context of certain parameters such as panchayat and political process, Functionally PR provides the very nature of roles member can hope to accomplish. Panchayats are also inseparable part of wider political process and as such are influenced by it.Hence any contention or expectation from women panchayats out of proper context would only be misleading and it would undeservingly lead to crisis of acceptability and vulnerability.

### **3. SUGGESTION**

Partly based on insight provided by respondents and partly on our understanding of the situation, few suggestions are submitted for due consideration mainly to improve performance of women panchayats.

a) The point that needs scupulous attention is that according to the Panchayat Act of West Bengal and other States seats reserved for women are to rotate that is reserved seats for 1993 election will be unreserved in 1998 election and new seats will be made reserved. No doubt this will forbid the reign of vested interest or family domination but for women it has other implications. Those women who have workedenthusiastically and gained on the job exposure are not likely to come again. As effective participation heavily depends on experience for the deprived section, this rotation system is likely to backfire

25. Dutta Bishaka (ed) (1995:90). *And Who Will Make the Chappati* A Study of AWP in Maharastra. Aalochana. Pune

26. " Within parties women's issues are categorised as social and not political to be dealt exclusively by women's wing " Suxena, K ( 1994:393) Empowerment of Women - The Indian Context. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55(4).

One of its negative impacts will be to dissociate representatives from constituencies. In any democracy representatives are expected to nurture those constituencies from where they are elected. If any body - man or woman - is not sure about the availability of constituency in future he/she will refrain from cultivating it in right earnest. Reservation in the present format is likely to perpetuate this trend for women.

However, it can realistically be assumed that present reserved seats becoming unreserved next time will not generally be allotted to women again. Moreover it may be argued that willing women claimants may contest from newly reserved seats elsewhere<sup>27</sup> but it is most unlikely for various reasons. Thus the new squad will require time and experience to be acquainted with required experience like present ones. This cycle will continue at least for two terms. In this special backdrop if rotation system is postponed for next election it would be possible to utilise the experience of present capable incumbents and parties would get sufficient time to mature a new genre for the future.

b) From Mehta 1978 to 1993 Report for WB Government desirability of governable units is persistently emphasised, of course without avail. Besides inefficiency, non viability and 'hierarchies of attention', for women larger geographical constituencies are proving baffling. For Zilla Parishad respondents it demands overnight stay to attend meetings as it is not possible to return in a day. To be fair, such overnight halts are one of the reasons why women face wrath of husbands/ families. Certain PR Offices are in rather inaccessible geographical areas. Furthermore, certain constituencies presently attached to certain PSs ( Cooch Behar 1, Mathabangha 1, Tufanganj 1, for instance ) demand very time consuming troublesome communication from some members. If they are integrated in other PSs distance and hazards would be reduced drastically. One cardinal effect of it is what one PS women sums it up - for this communication hazards they are unable to attend Office periodically to be kept informed about latest schemes etc. and for this ignorance it has become rather easy for others to sideline them. Thus unwieldy unit size somewhere needs immediate reorganisation.

c) If Chairperson group is found fumbling selection process is largely responsible. Regarding selection of candidates some anomalies may be there and these can be tolerated because of suddenness of reservation but in future these need to be corrected. Significantly where there is no dearth of suitable candidates ( we are convinced) it is only expedient that willing and competent women should be selected and only merit should get priority instead of family connection or ploy to make them scapegoats.

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27. In Maharashtra parties subverted rotation by rotating same women from different constituencies. *National Commission for Women*: (1993:9).

d) Moreover cooperation of male colleagues is absolutely essential as it provides immediate setting. Women require trust, concurrence, guidance from male members who have experience to share with. If males behave in the ways found in two PSs women are really to be the lost case. It may be onerous to accentuate such changes in perception forthwith especially in the face of age old patriarchal values. Here it is believed that the role of parties - though themselves male dominated - is superlatively significant. By drawing and training they can prepare women to the utmost and at the same time make the 'rival' men sensitized about women's rights.

e) Another point persistently brought in by women needs introspection. Particularly at GP women members are of lower economic background, they are also engaged in subsistence works. But for PR works they have to sacrifice a lot economically. The Travelling Allowance they are entitled to are not only meager but at worst uncertain. Their demand for monthly allowance or some wage for those days spent for PR meeting/works or training seems justified (as provided in Karnataka). For it will compensate the monetary loss, make them independent from family doles and relieve them from physical labour involved in 2-4 K.M. walk for PR Office. Convincingly it may be balancing investment to get more out of enthusiasm and dedication.

f) In order to inculcate trust and attune with collective decision making intricacies participation of women in informal agencies should be emphasised. In India women organisations have successfully mobilised women along women issues like Anti Attack or Environment etc. and large number of Non Governmental Organisations are also organising them emphatically both for PR and other affairs. But these efforts are scattered and no sign of them in this district is discernable.

g) Large number of women panchayats are ignorant and poorly informed about wider social issues. They should be helped to gain self image, confidence through requisite training, dissemination of information and supportive network. A lot of government sponsored training programmes in West Bengal - both at State and District levels - have been conducted thus far for Chairpersons but ironically not for general members. General members also earnestly require training about the responsibilities and intricacies involved in PR.

#### C 4. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Reservation for women is not the panacea but only precursor. No doubt it would foster increasing social acceptance of women's eminence and positively encourage those who are still averse to political career. At the same time, the proven ability of women panchayats would help to mend centuries old abasement thus restore parity. But problematics of reservation should not also be evaded.

The plain fact is that nowhere spontaneously and deservedly but only for statutory compulsion women are drawn into PR. Elected women have all round inferior social status, they lack conviction, exposure, sustentative environment and almost everything. Moreover without time to settle in and grasp role intricacies and without sufficient functional and political expanse it would be debasing if women are to prove their mantle instantly and completely. Any euphoria or enormous thrust out of proper context may ultimately lead to crisis of vulnerability or acceptability which may perpetuate the inequality reservation is purported to have solved.

In western societies women are considerably liberated thanks to technology but Indian counterpart is still revolving around furnace for most part of day and life. Patriarchal ideology and obstinate social ethos undermining women's worth also have prostrating effect on them. Toned down to domesticity and the ideology propagating the desirability of such women are in a quandary. To cope with it fruitfully and stand for political roles they should have lift in two counts simultaneously. One is diminutive domestic engagements both by technology and supportive family thus redeeming and enthusing women to undertake public roles and other is palpable change in values exonerating them from no fault of their own.

In the literature changes in values accepting women's role in politics is sporadic. In fact everywhere cultural changes in the sense of mental perception do not commensurate with material changes in society thus often propping up conflict in role expectation and performance. This dichotomy is likely to dissipate only gradually. However, resembling with the new impulsion <sup>28</sup> definite conversion in values is also in the offing. In the all India survey <sup>29</sup> 75% male respondents favour equal participation of women in politics. Similarly data of this district manifest a clear trend of acceptance of women with entity of their own.

28. Recently gender has received wider attention. Central Government is considering 30% job reservation for women as Prime Minister informed the nation on 15 October 1996. And some State like Maharashtra has already reserved such quota for women.

29. CSDS/ICSSR/India Today Survey. *India Today*. 31 August 1996.

If reservation is a means both men and women should strive level best to ensure that the end is achieved. It is found that women have not felt repressed but taken up the challenge of PR post zealously. With time and experience their efficacy would surely leap up. But for it mediating environment and cooperating sustentation are also earnestly essential.

To grasp women panchayat's role and for future evaluation of their roles we would also note few important points.

Given the track records of parties as to women candidatures, instantaneousness of reservation might have compelled parties to sponsor, just not to let seats vacant, a portion of family centered and not so willing candidates . For this reason the first batch of women ( as our respondents) will not be forerunner of future women representation in PR both in terms of background and performance. In all probability the next batch will settle the trend.

Also time sequence seems important. It is already disclosed that with time women performance improves. Experience of three years for women respondents may have been one reason of divergence of results of this study and others. Therefore firm conclusion should require yet another in-depth study preferably at village or GP level after next PR election.

It is also commonly conceded that no political party has so far been willing or able to relate women representation to the whole dimension of women development. Women issues have truly been subsumed by rhetoric of election propaganda. PR being the integral part of wider political process, substantial party control will inevitably be there. In this context women's role or gender development will very much depend on ideology/programme of parties as well. We should direct sufficient attention to the perspective of parties to ascertain women's role in future. Role of panchayat members or women in particular should be understood in overall functional context of PR. If one has to get into developmental or gender developmental role of women one should consider what is feasible and what is the role performance. Any fervent expectation or contention out of this context would only be misleading.